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Man of Mystery.

Member of the Continental Congress.

Signer of the Declaration of Independence.

President of the Provincial Council of Georgia.



A Brief Biographical Review

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William Montgomery Clemens

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Wm Montgomery Clatter

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BUTTON GWINNETT

Button Gwinnett, member of the Continental Congress from Georgia, and Signer of the Declaration of Independence, like the Man in the Iron Mask, was a man of mystery. No patriot of the American Revolution, no citizen of the Republic, is as little known, nor is there such meagre material in manuscript or printed book, concerning any individual in American history. He has been likened to a meteor, flashing across the universe, and in his brief career of scarce half a dozen years small record is left to us of his movements and activities during this brief period of time. Coming out of the vast unknown, he flashes the light of his being upon the world, and fades away into an obscurity and a darkness more intense than that from which he emerged. A remarkable figure in the early history of a great Southern state, we know less of him now, than was known in the year of 1776, when in Philadelphia, he signed the immortal document, that makes his name endure for all time.

We are informed by a writer in the *Encyclopedia Britannica*¹ that Gwinnett was born in England in 1732 and was a merchant in Bristol. Harper's *Cyclopedia of United States History*² says he was born *about* 1732.

A Philadelphia publication³ declares that Button Gwinnett was born in Wales. His surname is no doubt of Welsh origin, being almost identical with Gwynnedd, which at once recalls to mind the famous Welsh king, Owen Gwynnedd.

1. Werner's Americanized Edition.

2. Edition of 1893, vol. 1, page 603.

3. Unrivalled Atlas of the World. Philadelphia Public Ledger Co., 1899.

The extensive and comprehensive catalogues of books in the British Museum contain perhaps every name in English literature. There are but two Gwinnetts. In 1732, Richard Gwinnett published a comedy, *The Country Squire*, and in 1770, appeared *The Life, Travels and Adventures of Ambrose Gwinnett*. This was a small pamphlet which ran in various penny editions up to as late a period as 1850. In the book, Gwinnett says: "I was born in Canterbury, in 1680, where my father dealt in hops. There were but two children, myself and a sister who married one Sawyer, who in 1710, kept a public house in Deal, County Kent."

This concludes his "life", and rather strange to say, in the original entry of the first edition of this pamphlet, in the British Museum catalogue, appears the following note after the name Ambrose Gwinnett:

"The Life and Adventures of Ambrose Gwinnett, by himself, *or rather by Isaac Bickerstaff*."

In the year 1709, Sir Richard Steele, under the pseudonym of Isaac Bickerstaff, began writing scores of shilling-shockers and pamphlets, and in 1711, commenced the publication of *The Tatler*, edited by Isaac Bickerstaff. It has been stated that Steele found the name of Bickerstaff on a blacksmith's sign and added Isaac to suit his fancy. So it would appear that our Ambrose Gwinnett was not a real personage, but a creation of Sir Richard Steele.

If the name of Gwinnett did exist in England in 1770, it is now quite extinct, and is not to be found in British genealogy nor in heraldry.

The London Post Office Directory, a huge book of names, contains no Gwinnett. With the exception of the name of the Signer the word does not occur anywhere in the United States. The nearest approach is the name of a soldier of the Revolution, Joseph Gunnett, which is

found in the list of Virginia soldiers published in 1911, by the Virginia State Library.

There appears to be some doubt as to the first name of Gwinnett. The statement has been made that his Christian name was Bolton or Bulton, and that an error of the printer made it Button. A careful examination of the signature of the Signer inclines us to give favor to this view. The first name can as easily be read Bulton as Button, when we find the first "t" might well be taken for a closed "l". The word Bolton is English, while Button is a Yankee corruption of Bouton, which as a family name, is of French origin.

Gwinnett as a family name is thus unknown. There is nowhere in encyclopedic or biographic literature even the merest hint as to his parentage. After a careful study of what is available as to his life and at the conclusion of exhaustive research, the inquirer is tempted to doubt even the authenticity of his name, with the surmise that both Button and Gwinnett were cognomens deliberately assumed for a purpose unknown to us.

"We possess no means of knowing (N. Dwight, *Lives of the Signers*, page 358) the history of Mr. Gwinnett's early life. It is probable however, that it was distinguished by nothing very remarkable."

Lossing in his *Lives of the Signers*, (page 227) tells us: "The pecuniary means of his parents were limited, yet they managed to give him a good, common education." N. Dwight, Esq., in his *Lives of the Signers*, (page 358) says "His parents were respectable, and though their pecuniary circumstances were moderate, they gave him the means of obtaining an excellent education." Dr. Goodrich, in his *Lives*, makes a mere shifting of words, when he writes (page 452) "His parents were respectable in life, and

gave their son as good an education as their moderate circumstances would allow.”

A statement in an official publication of the United States Government⁴ informs us that young Gwinnett pursued an academic course, although there is no other authority for the assertion. The same publication states that he came to the United States in 1765, whereas all other biographies give the year as 1770. It is also claimed by the same authority that Gwinnett followed commercial pursuits in Charleston for a period of three years but the business archives of Charleston do not bear out this statement.

In the year 1768, according to one authority⁵ Gwinnett purchased a plantation on St. Catherine's Island, in Georgia, although another authority⁶ says this removal was accomplished in 1772. A third writer claims that soon after his arrival in Charleston, Gwinnett removed to Savannah where he was established as a general trader. Harpers' also places the year as 1772, when "he settled on St. Catherine's Island, off the coast of Georgia." And it is asserted elsewhere that he engaged in agriculture, but we do not know that he conducted his plantation for pleasure or for profit.

In the Magazine of American History, his attitude toward Great Britain, at this time, is presented as follows: "Mr. Gwinnett had long taken a deep interest in the welfare of the colonies; but he despaired of a successful resistance to Great Britain. His sentiments on this point, however, underwent a great change, and he became a warm advocate for opposing the unjust exactions of the mother country."

4. Congressional Directory for 1911, page 691.

5. Congressional Directory for 1911, page 691.

6. Werner's Americanized Encyclopedia Britannica.

7. Harper's Cyclopedia of United States History, 1893, vol. 1, page 603.

It is stated in Harper's *Cyclopedia* that "he was cautious and doubtful and took no part in political affairs until after the war for Independence was begun when he became active in the patriot cause." In another volume⁸ we read that "he joined the popular party and was conspicuous at Revolutionary committees", which does not agree with the Harper assertion that he was "cautious and doubtful."

The Parish of St. John elected Mr. Gwinnett a delegate to the Continental Congress. St. John was a strong hold of patriotism. The colony of Georgia very sparsely populated at this period seemed quite inactive in the controversy with Great Britain and in St. John alone was concentrated all the outspoken patriotism in the province. The General Assembly having refused to send delegates to the Congress of 1774, St. John Parish to all intent separated from the province and elected its own representative to the Continental Congress. The spirit of independence spread rapidly however, and the whole of Georgia gave her vote in 1776, for the freedom of the colonies from British rule.

He was a delegate to the Continental Congress from Georgia from 1775 to 1776, and in 1777 was a member of the Convention to form a State Constitution for Georgia. He thus became President of the Provincial Congress of Georgia, as well as having signed the Declaration of Independence.

In Goodrich's *Lives of the Signers*, we read that Gwinnett "was a competitor with Col. Lachlan McIntosh for the office of Brigadier-General, and formed a settled hostility to his successful rival. Being afterward president of the Council, he nominated a subordinate officer to the command of an expedition against Florida. The ex-

⁸. *Biographical Annals of the Civil Government of the United States*, by Charles Lanman, Washington, 1876, page 177.

pedition failed and by consequence, Mr. Gwinnett failed to be elected Governor in May, 1777. In the mortification of his adversary, McIntosh exulted. In the result Gwinnett challenged him. Fighting at the distance of twelve feet both were wounded, and Mr. Gwinnett died of his wounds, May, 27, 1777, aged 44. In his miserable death may be seen the effects of envy, rivalry and hatred. Had he possessed the spirit of the gospel he would not thus have perished."

Follows another account of the causes leading up to the duel: "On the death of the President of the Provincial Council, Mr. Gwinnett was elected to the vacant station. In this situation he seems to have indulged in unbecoming hostility towards an old political rival, Colonel McIntosh; adopting several expedients to mortify his adversary, and never divesting himself of his embittered hatred towards him. In an expedition which he had projected against East Florida Mr. Gwinnett designed to command the Continental troops and militia of Georgia himself, thereby excluding Colonel McIntosh from the command even of his own brigade. Just at this period it became necessary to convene the legislature. In consequence of his official duties, Mr. Gwinnett was prevented from proceeding on the expedition. He therefore appointed to the command a subordinate officer of McIntosh's brigade. The expedition failed entirely, and contributed to defeat the election of Mr. Gwinnett as governor. This failure blasted his hopes, and brought his political career to a close. McIntosh was foolish enough to exult in the mortification of his adversary. The consequence was that Mr. Gwinnett presented him a challenge. They fought at the distance of only twelve feet. Both were severely wounded. The wound of Mr. Gwinnett proved fatal. He expired on

the 27th of May, in the forty-fifth year of his age,—a melancholy instance of the misery produced by harboring in the heart the absorbing passion of rancorous envy.”

General Lachlan McIntosh was born near Inverness, in Scotland, March 17, 1725. In 1736 his father joined General Oglethorpe in his expedition to Georgia, and with about a hundred Highlanders settled in what is now McIntosh County, on the Altamaha river. William Allen in his *American Biography*, 1832, writes: “Lachlan was the principal military officer of the Province of Georgia, and in 1776, was appointed Brigadier General. Having murdered Mr. Gwinnett in a duel, the event, instead of banishing him from the army, was the cause of his removal to the north. He was a member of Congress in 1774. He died at Savannah, February 20, 1806, aged 80 years.”

In a sketch of Gen. McIntosh in *Harper's Cyclopaedia*, appears the following: “Gwinnett persecuted McIntosh beyond endurance and he called the persecutor a scoundrel.” Another writer⁹ says “Gwinnett took advantage of his official position to subject General McIntosh and his family to a series of malicious persecutions—that Gwinnett was a man of bad passions, unrestrained by any honorable principles.”

“Native born Englishmen,” says Lossing (page 229 in his *Lives of the Signers*) “were in the habit of regarding the colonists as inferior to themselves, and they were apt to assume a bearing toward them highly offensive. In some degree Mr. Gwinnett was obnoxious to this charge, and he looked upon his rapid elevation in public life, as an acknowledgement of his superiority. These feelings were too thinly covered not to be seen by the people when he was President of the Council, and it soon engendered

9. *Washington and the Generals of the American Revolution*, Philadelphia, 1866, vol. 1.

among the natives a jealousy that was fully reciprocated by him. This was doubtless the prime cause of all the difficulties which surrounded him toward the close of his life, and brought him to his tragical death."

"His rapid promotions had accumulated upon him. (Dwight, *Lives of the Signers*, page 360) within one year after his first appearance in public life. But it will be remembered that he was a *Native Englishman*; had come into a colony and among a people of whose real character, Englishmen knew but little; for whom they were accustomed to indulge a feeling that partook very little of respect. * * * the rapid elevation of a foreigner, a native of a country with which the colonies were at open war, and who had resided but a few years among them, began to excite jealousies among some native citizens who were candidates for popular favor."

Rev. George White in his *Historical Collections of Georgia*, speaks of "an unfortunate result of an unfortunate misunderstanding between two gentlemen." Another writer declares there was a divided sentiment in Georgia at the time of the duel, and for many months thereafter the friends of Gwinnett were powerful enough to cause the arrest of McIntosh on a charge of murder. He was tried and acquitted but thought it prudent to leave the State. Among the most influential friends of Gwinnett was Dr. Lyman Hall, himself a Signer of the Declaration of Independence. Dr. Hall found it very difficult to keep the patriots of Georgia in an united body. For a considerable time the immediate effects of the Gwinnett-McIntosh duel were so disastrous that the cause of liberty itself was endangered. It was not until 1779 that McIntosh returned to Georgia, when he took part in the siege of Savannah.

There has been much of conjecture as to the domestic

life of Button Gwinnett. Of his family affairs we have but the slightest knowledge.

Under the title of *The Lives of the Signers*, there have been volumes published bearing the names as authors, of John Sanderson, Rev. Charles A. Goodrich, N. Dwight, Benjamin J. Lossing and a few others. The first of these John Sanderson, in his *Biography of the Signers of the Declaration of Independence*, Philadelphia, 1828, says on page 119:

“Having married in England, Gwinnett resolved to emigrate to America.”

There appears to have been no authority for this assertion, and subsequently, when Dr. Goodrich issued his *Lives of the Signers*, he reiterates this statement in the following words: (page 452.)

“Some time after his marriage in England, he removed to America, selecting Charleston, as a place of settlement.”

Then follows N. Dwight, Esq., in the year 1840, with his *Lives of the Signers*, in which he says on page 358:

“Soon after his marriage he resolved to remove to America.”

And follows dear old Ben Lossing in his *Signers of the Declaration*, New York, 1848, page 227,

“He was apprenticed to a merchant in Bristol, and after completing his term of service, he married, and commenced business on his own account. Allured by the promise of wealth and distinction in America, he resolved to emigrate hither and arrived in Charleston in the year 1770.”

We observe that these esteemed historians give no authority for the statement that Gwinnett was married when he came to America. Rather the first author, finding a lack of material in the data concerning Gwinnett, deals

in mere surmise and his confreres who follow him, repeat and copy his assertion.

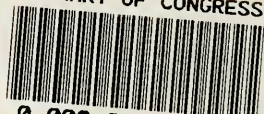
There is nothing of record, legally or otherwise, to show that Mr. Gwinnett was ever married or that he was the father of offspring, save a letter written in 1775 to Benjamin Sheftel of Savannah, the only letter written by Gwinnett known to exist. In his epistle he speaks of his wife in the third person and also mentions a Miss Betsy Gwinnett who may have been either a sister or a daughter. The full text of this solitary letter left us by Gwinnett is as follows: "Mrs. Gwinnett begs leave to present Compliments to Mr. & Mrs. Sheftel hopes Mrs. Sheftel is recovered. She wishes Mr. Sheftel & Miss Sheftel a pleasant journey & hopes they will see Betsy Gwinnett there. Mrs. Gwinnett begs it as a particular favor & to hear from them on their return from Charles Town. She has sent the makers name & number of her watch to Mr. Levy Sheftel. Mr. Jackson London 2466—hope he will please to do me the kindness to bring it having a Letter from Mr. Foley where to apply for it."

With address: "To Mr. Sheftel in Savannah."

There appears to have been no will or other document naming surviving wife or children, although, we learn from Lossing (*Lives of the Signers*, page 229) "Mr. Gwinnett left a wife and several children, but they did not survive him." Dwight (page 362, *Lives of the Signers*) says: "He left a widow and several young children behind him."

Among the collectors of autograph letters, the signature of Button Gwinnett is considered a great rarity. The letter to Benjamin Sheftel, previously mentioned, was placed on sale at auction in New York City, in January, 1921, and was sold for \$1025.00. This was the most important Gwinnett item ever sold at public sale. There

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